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BRING BACK THE LRRP

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FOREWORD

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BRING BACK THE LRRP

by

LTC Henry G. Gole

The US Army force structure reveals a glaring gap. The combat intelligence and target acquisition capability inherent in Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols (LRRP) has been almost totally erased since our Vietnam experience. Despite well-reasoned recommendations based upon rigorous research that the gap be filled, especially in the US Army in Europe, no action has been taken to provide combat commanders with the very best eyes and ears available to them, those of the LRRP.¹ The continuing lack of an essential capability is a serious deficiency for which we will pay in blood, particularly during the earliest phases of combat in Europe. This defect demands attention.

Among the many concerns of a corps or division commander engaged in combat, one of the most pressing is knowledge of the enemy in front of him or on his flanks and how that enemy can affect the friendly commander's mission. We have deprived him of one of the best sources of that knowledge. Our unwillingness to provide LRRP's to corps and division commanders stems largely from two American military biases: overreliance upon gadgetry and aversion to elite organizations.

I. Gadgets.

Fascination with gadgets is deeply imbedded in American culture and has served us well in commerce, industry and in the wars we have fought. From Benjamin Franklin through Samuel B. Morse, Thomas Edison and Robert S. McNamara we have been pragmatic fixers of problems, a people subconsciously convinced that the answer to most human problems can be found in a laboratory, system, or gadget. Until the war in Vietnam the gadgets

produced by American imagination and industry were fitted into military organizations in some sensible proportion mixing men and the products of our highly developed technology. In Vietnam, probably out of frustration due to the inability of the nation which placed the first man on the moon to defeat emaciated orientals running around the jungle at night, all sense of proportion was lost. A fence was built between the north and the south; people-sniffers, defoliants, seismic and acoustical devices, radars and sundry black boxes were tried; more bombs would be dropped in Vietnam than on Hitler's Germany. The gadgets did everything but produce victory.

Recently the New York Times reported on the progress of the US 9th Division, the so-called high technology division engaged in a number of innovative trials to produce a force light enough for rapid strategic deployment and potent enough to sustain itself on a modern battlefield. Intelligence was mentioned in one paragraph of the Times account and underlines the point of this plea by failing to mention LRRP's and the human dimension of combat intelligence and target acquisition:

A battalion specializing in collecting electronic intelligence, jamming enemy communications and radar, and gathering information by ground radar has already begun to run tests. Some of its new equipment was bought off the shelf from a commercial radio supply store.²

In addition to demonstrating that the Army development system is not responsive to small quantity specialized equipment needs, the cited passage ascribes a kind of magic capability to the latest in scientific devices, an expression more of a wish than a description of operational reliability. Even the hardware a generation removed from Vietnam-era acoustical and visual equipment breaks down and requires maintenance; operators still

become numb staring at screens and concentrating on sounds. Human beings make mistakes, and machines fail to function just when one has been conditioned to rely upon them. Elephants are confused with tanks and monkeys with men while humidity or freezing temperatures play tricks on machines and operators.

Certainly the latest technology must be exploited and employed to do things men cannot do as well as machines and to supplement human capabilities wherever possible. The error we are inclined to make is to rely too heavily upon hardware when experience dictates that a mix of recon men and machines are the best means for gathering and reporting combat intelligence. The US Army seems prepared to continue to exaggerate the capability of sensitive machines and to denigrate or ignore the reliability of the best gatherer and reporter, man with a good radio transmitter. We are in danger of failing to make the critical distinction between equipping men and manning equipment.

II. Anti-Elitism.

For reasons not entirely clear (perhaps it is only to be expected of the developers of the assembly line and interchangeable parts), the US Army has historically viewed elite troops with suspicion. Even when tolerated and given a place in our force structure, elite units were often misused. Ranger units covered themselves with glory in World War II,³ but they were often maldeployed in Korea as ordinary line companies. Special Forces units were severely reduced in number in the post-Vietnam years after establishing an admirable combat record doing the hazardous and dirty little jobs in Vietnam, jobs quite removed from their primary mission of training, motivating, equipping, and leading dissident elements deep inside denied areas. The fact that some of the assigned dirty little jobs weren't

necessary contributed to the suspicion that Special Forces in Vietnam was running its own shadow war, an allegation which alienated conventional officers who were dubious in any event about organizations outside of the divisional structure. Thus the demise of recon units after the Vietnam experience was probably more than a case of throwing the baby out with the bath water. It was part of the attempt to purge the Army of all taints associated with that war. The self-confidence, aggressiveness, and competence of elite troops--Rangers, Special Forces and recon men--rankled conventional officers. Our Army wants tigers in combat but prefers docile pussycats in time of peace. The Modern Volunteer Army prefers the American corporation to the Foreign Legion as its model. Targets will be "serviced," not destroyed. Men will be "managed," not led. Elite units will be disbanded after our wars and resurrected as shots are fired in anger again.

Army leadership understandably devotes most of its attention to divisions, brigades and battalions, but it erroneously neglects the less frequently used but essential precision instruments in the tool box. We had great difficulty in deciding to leave that international badge of the paratrooper, the red beret, where it belongs: on the trooper's head. We lament the absence of esprit among our troops while disbanding organizations which demonstrate high morale or stripping them of its outward signs. In the contest between standardization and excellence, standardization wins every time. Uniqueness seems to violate something in the soul of US Army leadership, a problem understood by General Edward Meyer as he considers establishing something like the British regimental system in the US Army. One hopes that what he accomplishes will not be reversed by his successor to be born again under his successor's successor.

III. The Vietnam Lesson.

It did not take division commanders in Vietnam long to recognize that LRRP's would be required to find the enemy if the division was to fix and fight him. Lacking a LRRP capability, commanders determined to remedy that deficiency from within their own resources. Some Special Forces soldiers were diverted to divisions to organize and lead LRRP units. Project Delta, a 5th Special Forces Group element which conducted in-country reconnaissance missions, was tasked to train the divisional recon teams (RT). Beginning in 1966 a steady stream of recon trainees passed through Nha Trang to acquire those soldier skills necessary for the demands of the recon mission, a mission requiring special techniques beyond those normally found in US rifle companies. The divisional soldiers brought a willingness and sense of adventure to Nha Trang and acquired there the techniques developed by Project Delta from experience on the ground. To suggest that a rifle squad--even the best rifle squad in a company--possesses the resourcefulness required for the exacting and hazardous recon mission is to fail in understanding the demands of such work. This was clearly recognized by division commanders who demanded recon elements of their own, and it was understood by General Westmoreland who formalized ad hoc arrangements between the divisions and 5th Special Forces Group by creating the MACV Recondo School at the Project Delta compound in Nha Trang.⁴ Later in the war the 75th Rangers would make their contribution to the recon mission in Vietnam for the divisions and separate brigades. The point is that in war we needed LRRP's and created them; they were promptly disbanded in peace.⁵

IV. Next Time.

The problem for the US Air Force and Army field artillery is less one of killing targets than acquiring them. An Air Force colleague reports

that in flying an A-10 on a clear day over a range in the American South he had difficulty in spotting tanks known to be at a given location. He never did see them. It is unlikely that he'll be more successful against an enemy adept at concealment in a European environment characterized by frequent and protracted periods of limited visibility. The same problems will become obvious as artillery reaches out to the 35 km range planned for our new indirect fire weapons. Firepower is impotent if the target is not located. Soviet movement at night and under the concealment provided by foul weather will compound the problem of finding the target. Observed fire controlled by a human being remains the preferred method.

Lack of combat intelligence and the absence of a LRRP capability in our divisions and corps in Europe will require our commanders to improvise again--next time. Gadgetry in Europe will suffer a high failure rate due to cloud cover and limited visibility, and the Soviets will play their strong cards by jamming our electronics, deceiving us with phony emissions and exercising great communications discipline. There will be a paucity of reliable combat intelligence, particularly in the critical first hours and days of combat when fast-moving and numerous Soviet forces will confuse our efforts to find them so that they can be fixed and fought. They will move during periods of limited visibility and make good use of camouflage. An outmanned and outgunned US Army could be outmaneuvered as well. We cannot afford to be blind and outflanked. Without reliable information about enemy activity we are in danger of making our already tenuous position worse. It is unlikely that commanders will be given the time to organize, train, and deploy reconnaissance teams in the early stages of the next war.

Those who would invest hope in Special Forces or Ranger units to perform the LRRP mission are doomed to disappointment. Special Forces

elements are trained for and will be deployed in a strategic mission of little immediate interest to corps and division commanders whose tactical concerns will be with an enemy in their immediate neighborhood. Active Army Ranger units, however well-qualified to do the LRRP job, train for other missions and will be neither available nor familiar with the terrain on which they might be expected to operate. Our excellent Army National Guard Ranger units, the only true LRRP capability we currently enjoy, are unfamiliar with the Headquarters with which they will be required to operate-- if room on aircraft is found to get them to Europe in the critical early days of war in Europe.⁶ In brief, commanders in Europe need LRRP's in the force structure now, in time of peace, so that they will be immediately available in the confused initial phases of combat and as the battle develops. They should be assigned to Europe so that commanders and staffs might learn how to use them on terrain and in an environment with which both parent units and LRRP's should be familiar. The excellent Special Forces soldiers and Rangers are precisely the kinds of men who could do the LRRP job, but they are not, in fact, preparing for that highly specialized role due to other operational requirements.

Our allies in Europe are fully aware of the need for LRRP's. The Bundeswehr assigns an airborne-qualified LRRP company to each of the three German Corps deployed. They practice their skills in the area of anticipated combat, conduct excellent training and enjoy a degree of stability and team integrity almost unknown in the US Army. Belgian LRRP's consist of small cells of highly skilled soldiers who remain in four-man teams for years. They, too, are airborne-qualified and cross-trained in medical, weapons, intelligence, and communications skills for combat in a specific corps area in Europe. The British Special Air Service (SAS) troops are among the best in the world and prepare for the LRRP

mission as do the French and our other European allies. The Europeans invest quality personnel and priority training in their recon teams, a practice to be emulated by the US Army. Total reliance upon gadgets is unsatisfactory to the Europeans and should be to us. Smaller European armies manage to find the resources to do the recon job and to do it well.

The Soviet Union also believes that LRRP teams are necessary. The reconnaissance battalion of the motorized rifle division and tank division includes a long-range reconnaissance company designed to operate 100 kilometers behind the enemy FEBA. The Soviets also have a LRRP capability at Army level consisting of teams planned for use 350 kilometers from the FEBA. Team members are carefully selected and are subjected to rigorous physical and psychological training. Their main targets are our nuclear delivery means, command and control facilities, radar locations, troop locations and movements. They probably report on a planned schedule, except in emergency, using short burst transmissions to minimize detection.⁷

V. Tasks.

Even among professional soldiers there seems to be some blurring of missions and roles as LRRP, ranger and Special Forces operations are considered. At the risk of oversimplifying what it is these units do, when thinking of Special Forces one should imagine units operating hundreds of miles in the enemy rear over a period of months, even years, in the midst of a friendly indigenous force. The Special Forces soldier is a tough teacher whose function is training and leading non-US irregular forces deep in the enemy rear.

Ranger forces are characterized by the execution of missions which are short and violent. The ambush, raid or prisoner snatch, operations

requiring daring and superb combat skills, are the hallmark of ranger actions. They are normally conducted no deeper in the enemy rear than tactical headquarters. They get in, do the job, and get out.

The recon team doing the LRRP mission normally avoids direct engagement with the enemy. Recon men typically provide combat intelligence to higher headquarters to be acted upon by others. New capabilities, however, provide new opportunities to the recon man allowing him to direct and control the destruction of targets he has acquired. Rapid technological advances in defensive weapons, particularly precision-guided weapons, might allow observers behind the enemy's lines to broaden the defender's actions to include not only the point of the enemy's attack but also his command posts, assembly areas, artillery, ammunition supply points, POL points, reserves, nuclear delivery means and radar locations. Force could be brought to bear by recon teams effectively acting in a manner similar to those of an advanced or "jump" command post. The team's control headquarters must sort out the LRRP's priorities on a mission basis. The team can perform either the intelligence function or play a role in the destruction of key targets, but involvement in target destruction--normally by air or indirect fire weapons--increases the probability of a team's detection by the enemy. Either the enemy intercepts electronic emissions, fixes the team's location and attempts to destroy it, or the enemy deduces the presence of a US recon team by the precision of certain US combat actions. Risking the team's survival is a function of the priority of the target to be destroyed and the difficulty of infiltrating teams into the lucrative target area.

One anticipates that in a European war the most likely means of positioning recon teams in the enemy rear would be by the stay-behind

technique. That is, the team remains in concealment as the attacker advances until the team is in the enemy rear. In a confused battle environment it is also possible to infiltrate teams by land, sea or air. When this can be done, teams can be used to direct target destruction. When infiltration is particularly hazardous, the valuable assets in place are best used for the lower risk mission of gathering and reporting intelligence.

It should be obvious that enlightened use of LRRP's requires training and experience by the staff officers at the control headquarters as well as the training of the teams. Staff knowledge of the LRRP's capabilities and limitations in a specific area of operation earns the trust and confidence of the recon men in those responsible for defining missions. This relationship does not develop among strangers; it requires close cooperation over time, preferably in time of peace.

VI. Conclusion.

Clearly the recon mission will be extremely hazardous on a sophisticated European battlefield. It will be less hazardous for teams which have trained together in the anticipated battle area than for improvised teams hastily put together or for rifle squads without special training. The US Army has always had ten or twenty soldiers in each company-sized unit who prefer operating independently on high risk missions to the often mind-numbing routine of most conventional units. Of the soldiers inclined to independence and adventure, some also possess the other requisite qualities of the good recon man: the courage, determination, self-discipline and self-reliance necessary to operate in an atmosphere of danger far from the flagpole. We shouldn't overlook a simple truth: some men thrive on such work.

Such men equipped with radios capable of transmitting short burst messages lasting just a few seconds, even fractions of a second, can report and, if well-trained, survive. There is a profound difference between information from such a skilled team reporting what is being seen in real time and the quality of information provided by a machine emitting squeals or depicting shadowy images. But there is no reason to rely upon one or the other when the commander can have both. The human source of combat intelligence, in addition to providing information on the enemy to the tactical operations center, also assists the operator of technical devices and his commander by corroborating with human senses what is displayed on such devices, thus enhancing the ability of headquarters to assess what is yielded by acoustical, seismic or screen displays. Commanders desperately need accurate and reliable information on enemy activity when that enemy is mobile and powerful. It is difficult to believe that we cannot provide at least one recon company to each of the two corps commanders in Europe and a platoon of recon teams to each division commander. Europe is the place to begin the return of the LRRP.

ENDNOTES

1. Strategic Studies Institute, Organization, Missions and Command and Control of Special Forces and Ranger Units in the 1980's (U), US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1979, pp. 71-81, 102, 104-106.

2. Richard Halloran, "Army Working to Develop Rapid-Moving Light Infantry Division," New York Times, 22 December 1980, p. D14.

3. One could cite many instances of extraordinary performance by Ranger units, but one comes immediately to mind. This writer stood at the very edge of Pointe du Hoc looking down a vertical cliff extending a hundred feet below where the water was white from crashing on the rocks on the seaward approach to the vertical wall that is the Point. It was difficult to believe that our soldiers in small craft navigated to the point, wended their way between the rocks, dismounted on a small ledge awash with foaming water, fired grappling hooks to the top, climbed the ropes with combat gear, cleared the top to face a reinforced concrete gun position behind barbed wire, and seized the position. There is a profound difference between reading these words and reconstructing the scene while standing on that spot.

4. Francis J. Kelly, US Army Special Forces, 1961-1971, Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 1973, pp. 96, 120-121, 170.

5. A fate shared by Special Forces whose strength peaked during the war in Vietnam to seven groups and 10,000 men. By the mid-1970's there were three Special Forces Groups. The Ranger story is similar: reactivated in 1950, deactivated in 1951; reactivated in 1974--this time in peace! Strategic Studies Institute, Organization, etc., p. 27 and p. 51.

6. "There are currently no LRRP units in the active US force structure," p. 71. Company E, 65th Infantry, Puerto Rico ARNG and Company F, 425th Infantry, Michigan ARNG are essentially LRRP units of the Vietnam era, p. 62, Ibid.

7. Department of the Army, Soviet Army Operations, US Army Intelligence and Security Command, US Army Intelligence and Threat Analysis Center, IAG-2-37 and 5-64.

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